

## COUNCIL – 9TH JANUARY 2012

### ITEM 5 QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

#### 5.1 Councillor Carter – Vacant Homes

According to the charity 'Shelter' in 2011 there were 1,773 vacant homes in Charnwood Borough. Could the Leader please inform members of how many of these properties have been vacant for over 6 months? Can the Leader also say how many times the Council has used its power under existing 'empty homes' regulations in 2011 to bring these properties back in to use?

*The Leader, or his nominee, will respond:*

*The number of properties unoccupied and unfurnished for over 6 months at 31st December 2011 was 740. The Council did not serve any empty dwelling management orders in 2011. Since the introduction of management orders under the Housing Act 2004, there have only been around 40 orders made by local authorities across the country. We focus our efforts on longer term empty properties (3 years +) and have used a range of tools including; a Tenant Finder Service, Fresh Start and, Partnership Grants to assist owners. In 2011, 3 previously long term empty properties were brought back into use as a direct result of our actions.*

#### 5.2 Councillor Ranson – Customer Service Standards

In view of the recent national reports highlighting poor Customer Service within the NHS, could the Council confirm its progress in this Area and its progress in delivering excellent Customer Service across all its services during the next year?

*The Leader, or his nominee, will respond:*

*The Council is committed to delivering Quality Customer Service across all its Services.*

*The Customer Service Excellence award was achieved by a number of services in 2011 and the Council took part in National Customer Service week in October 2011.*

*This national event proved to be a catalyst for many teams across the Council to become more involved a take a fresh look at how Customers perceived their service. Directors, Heads of Service and Councillors all spent some time with our Customer Services or Contact Centre teams. The feedback from those who took part was very positive and we have engaged with a number of services to improve quality of service provision. These improvements include services providing duty officers to ensure service provision is always available when we are open to the public and new comprehensive lists of services and contact numbers available from customer services.*

*As part of National Customer Services week we also involved local schoolchildren in understanding the diverse range of services we provide. The week culminated in staff nominating colleagues who had 'gone the extra mile' for an 'Unsung Hero' award.*

*8 members of staff received certificates from the Mayor.*

*Having committed to having the Contact Centre taking their repairs calls CNH have embraced 'customer excellence' and have actively encouraged all their managers, team leaders and board members to 'listen in' on calls to understand their Customers needs at first point of contact. By us all working together I am sure we will ensure that all our tenants in Charnwood will achieve quality housing.*

*The new Choice Based lettings area in Customer Services has provided an easily accessible feature for customers wishing to 'bid' for available properties. This is a mainly 'self serve' area which we have expanded to include a payment facility for those wishing to pay council tax or other council services.*

*The Council continues to consider options around delivering a quality service for its Customers. In 2012 we will seek to expand the number of Services using the Contact Centre and consider the possibility of amalgamating this team with the Customer Services team. This would deliver a consistent, more resilient one-stop approach for all enquiries, increase levels of Customer satisfaction and improve the quality of how the Council treats its residents.*

*We are currently engaged with Leisure Services in relation to Wildcard Bookings, Planning in relation to a number of issues identified to improve Customer Services and Housing Services around the new Right to Buy Legislation.*

*The latest levels of Customer satisfaction through the GovMetric benchmarking software show 96% of Customer responses rated the service they received from the Contact Centre as good while 94% rated the Customer Services centre as good.*

*In 2012 we hope to encourage other services to use GovMetric in order to implement Customer Excellence across the Council to ensure this is not just a strapline but is embedded in everything we do.*

*Finally I would like to thank all the staff in Customer Services and the Contact Centre for all their hard work in 2011 in engaging with our customers on a continuous basis and making CBC one of the highest achieving authorities for customer satisfaction in their front line services.*

*If anyone has any ideas where we could make further improvements in any service please let myself or David Platts know.*

### 5.3 Councillor Gaskell – Budget Setting

As a new-comer to the Council can the Leader explain to me why it is that neighbouring local authorities appear to be involved in panic management when it comes to setting their budgets, whilst here at Charnwood there appears an atmosphere of quiet confidence, which seems to reflect the praise contained in the recent outside auditor's report.

And does not the Leader agree with me that all those involved in setting our budgets are worthy of the highest acclaim for their efforts during the present period of austerity?

*The Leader, or his nominee, will respond:*

*It is not appropriate to comment on the financial situation of our neighbouring authorities but I can confirm that I am confident in our budget setting process. Whilst there is never any room for complacency, we are on track to deliver a credible budget that protects front line services, allows us to make a major investment in our housing stock and maintains the Council in robust financial health. I do think that this reflects very positively on the members and officers involved in this difficult and complex process.*

### 5.4 Councillor Williams – Community Facilities Grant for the Period 2014/15

In the Capital Plan there has been no allocation for Community Facilities Grant for the period 2014/15, can the Leader please explain why there is no money allocated to this vital community fund? Please can he inform Council if there are any proposals to allocate any money to the fund in 2014/15 and if so how much?

*The Leader, or his nominee, will respond:*

*The allocation of £150,000 for Community Facilities Grants is designed to cover the three year period of the Capital Plan. The detailed allocation envisages that funding will be 'front loaded' to the first years of the Capital Plan in order that attractive schemes can be brought to fruition earlier rather than later. However, any unspent amounts of this capital allocation at the end of 2013/14 may be carried forward into the final year of the plan if required.*

*It is worth noting that while the Capital Plan covers a three year period, a new Capital Plan is prepared on a bi-annual basis. In the case of Community Facilities Grants this would allow the Council to consider amending the capital allocation in the light of the number and quality of community facility schemes proposed, and competing demands for funding.*

## 5.5 Councillor Max Hunt – Progress of the LDF between 2007 and 2011

- (a) The Borough Council Labour Group recently received a presentation which included the material produced for the Core Options Consultation from October 2008. Could the Leader, who I believe was then the Planning Lead Member, explain why the plans to progress the LDF Core Options, informed by that consultation, were not further progressed at that time?
- (b) Is he aware of a letter sent by Caroline Spellman, then Shadow Communities Secretary of State, in August 2009 advising Conservative Council Leaders that little would be at risk by delaying the process?
- (c) I feel sure he is aware of the planning risks we now face on a daily basis by the failure to have an up to date local plan and the Coalition Government's stance in that respect; when does he now estimate that Charnwood have an up to date local plan?

*The Leader, or his nominee, will respond:*

- (a) *The last Public Consultation on the Core Strategy closed on 5<sup>th</sup> December 2008. Officers received over 1,500 representations covering around 3,000 separate issues - a significant volume of representation and far higher than was envisaged when the timetable for the LDF was planned. As a consequence, the Report of Consultation was not published until December 2009. Despite this, progress on the Core Strategy policy options continued after the close of consultation and included active discussion with stakeholders and promoters of SUE options and further work to gather evidence, respond to new government policy and finally to address the issues highlighted in representations. A significant volume of time was given to the investigation of the transport implications of growth and to this end consultants were commissioned to undertake more detailed transport assessments of each of the SUE options. This work was completed in two parts in March 2009 and August 2009 although further technical reports followed up to December 2009.*

*The scale of growth facing Charnwood is significant and communities are clearly concerned that all the evidence is in place and has been properly considered before a decision is taken about its location. The transport evidence is seen by many as being crucial to the decision about the future development strategy for Charnwood and the project milestones have been deferred to ensure that their implications are fully understood.*

- (b) *The Leader is aware of the letter. Along with a caution not to rush ahead with implementing Regional Spatial Strategies, the letter explains that officers should be asked to prepare both for a continuation of government policy or a radical change in the event of a conservative win at the May 2010 General Election and to “serve the best interests of their residents while operating within the law...”. Since the transport evidence was not complete until December 2009, and further work on*

policy development was still progressing in light of this and the 2008 representations, Caroline Spelman's letter did not in itself significantly delay the progress of the Core Strategy.

- (c) The Leader and Cabinet are aware of the importance of an up to date local plan. There is slippage in the project milestones set out in the approved Local Development Scheme (August 2011). This is due to problems with Leicestershire County Council's new integrated transport model (LLITM). Officers of the County Council, Charnwood Borough Council and the consultants MVA and AECOM are working closely to resolve the problems and to minimise slippage but regrettably it currently amounts to a 3 month delay.

Cabinet has agreed to review the Local Development Scheme annually and will receive a report in March updating the Scheme. This is the appropriate time to announce the revised project milestones.

#### 5.6 Councillor Max Hunt – Assessment of Highways and Transport Implications of possible SUE's

Since 2007 the Borough Council has commissioned a number of studies in addition to work done by Leicestershire County Council including reports by MVA Consultants: Delivering Strategies (2008); Setting Strategic Direction (2009) and Transport for Development (2009).

- (a) Could the Lead Member tell Council what payments the Borough Council has made to MVA, other consultants, and the County Council respectively (i) for transport modelling and assessment work in each financial year since 2007/8 and (ii) that currently estimated for 2011/12?
- (b) Could the Lead Member tell the Council (a) which of potential SUEs in Charnwood have been contracted for current assessment with MVA and/or the County's LLITM modelling system and (b) for what number of dwellings in each case?

The Leader, or his nominee, will respond:

(a)

<b>Year</b>	<b>MVA</b>	<b>County Council</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Notes</b>
2007/8	0	0	0	
2008/9	£68,108	£305	£68,413	
2009/10	£59,190	0	£59,190	Less grant funding of £17,950
2010/11	£600	0	£600	

<b>Year</b>	<b>MVA</b>	<b>County Council</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Notes</b>
2011/12*	0	£45,136	£45,136	Commissioning of LLITM is undertaken by the County Council and the Borough Council is subject to recharge.  Figure does not include developer contributions of £24,000
<b>total</b>			<b>£173,339</b>	

**Taking account of grants and developer contributions, the total estimated cost to CBC 2007-12 is £131,389**

\* includes cost to 31<sup>st</sup> December and estimated cost to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012

(b) All of the actively promoted SUEs are being assessed in the County's LLITM transport model. This includes all the growth locations identified in the consultation published in 2008 as well as others and at different scales. It is not possible to make public the number of dwellings in each case as this would reveal commercially sensitive information at a time when policy is still being developed.

#### PROCEDURE FOR QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Council Procedure Rule 5 applies to questions, which Councillors have given notice that they wish to ask. This rule enables a Councillor who has given the required notice to ask a question of the Leader or the Chair of a committee a question and ask a supplementary question and/or make a statement.